

In an Antique Land : Recognition to Unrecognized

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ABSTRACT

In an Antique Land is a fascinating fiction engineered by Amitav Ghosh blends a historical story with his own personal experiences as a graduate student in the Egyptian village Laṭāifa, published in 1992. In 1980s while pursuing graduation in cultural anthropology at the University of Alexandria, Ghosh learned about the discovery of ancient manuscripts, some of them dating back twelfth century A.D. in a Cairo Synagogue. The manuscript includes letters from a Jewish trader who owned an Indian slave. The script was both baffling and interesting at the same time. Ghosh became first interested, then obsessed, with this minor historical mystery and in his search for answers found himself drawn into the daily lives of two other persons, the Jewish merchant and his Indian slave in medieval Egypt. The fiction has two accounts, the first is the author's textualised persona 'Amitab' as pronounced by Egyptian when he had been in Egypt for his ethnographic fieldwork conducted in an Egyptian village thirty years ago and the second, a historical account of twelfth-century Indian Ocean trade networks of Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his probably Indian slave, 'Bomma'. The purpose of my paper is to unravel the unknown history of twelfth century.

Keywords: History, Historicity, Fiction, Historical Evidence, Textuality

In an Antique Land is a fascinating fiction engineered by Amitav Ghosh blends a historical story with his own personal experiences as a graduate student in the Egyptian village Laṭāifa, published in 1992. In 1980s while pursuing graduation in cultural anthropology at the University of Alexandria, Ghosh learned about the discovery of ancient manuscripts, some of them dating back twelfth century A.D. in a Cairo Synagogue. The manuscript includes letters from a Jewish trader who owned an Indian slave. The script was both baffling and interesting at the same time. Ghosh became first interested, then obsessed, with this minor historical mystery and in his search for answers found himself drawn into the daily lives of two other persons, the Jewish merchant and his Indian slave in medieval Egypt. The fiction has two accounts, the first is the author's textualised persona 'Amitab' as pronounced by Egyptian when he had been in Egypt for his ethnographic fieldwork conducted in an Egyptian village thirty years ago and the second, a historical account of twelfth-century Indian Ocean trade networks of Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his probably Indian slave, 'Bomma'. The purpose of my paper is to unravel the unknown history of twelfth century. "The slave of Ms H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in

1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres and he was scarcely out of the wings..(3). Thus begins the fiction. The slave makes his fleeting appearance from the wings.

Ghosh gives in depth account of Ben Yiju and his slave in *In an Antique Land*. He says: "knew nothing then about the slave of M S H 6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement." (8) He gives credit to the slave who is instrumental in his research work and the writing of this fiction. Ben Yiju was Jewish and belonged to the synagogue made up of some very cosmopolitan individuals who had close ties with the Indian trade. The 'Ben Ezra'- the synagogue had a storehouse called a 'geniza' in which all sorts of documents were stored. The contents of this geniza were left undisturbed for more than seven hundred years so, its discovery was described as being "the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered". (42) The first report of the Ben Ezra geniza was published in Europe. Ghosh deciphers the history of all those scholars who gradually succeeded in bringing the world's attention to the vast intellectual treasures that was secretly held in this geniza storeroom to name few scholars Simon van Geldern, Jacob Saphir, Abraham

Firkowitch, Paul Kahle, Elkan N. Adler, the Cattori family, Solomon Schechter, Solomon Wertheimer, Agnes S. Lewis and Margaret D. Gibson, Charles Tayloetc. Ghosh is excited to find such historical treasure which is survived in Cambridge Library. It is said that the account is written on good paper, the paper is having a length of foot and four inches wide. Though the papers are worn-out and faded at the top, the writing is clear and very legible.

The prologue of *In an Antique Land* introduces the mysterious object of Ghosh's research about the identity of Bomma an Indian slave of Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju. Ghosh read an article by E. Strauss in which MS H.6 was referred here by a merchant named Khalaf ibn Ishaah in Aden and Ghosh finds second reference in a letter collected by Prof. S.D. Goitein, "Letter of Medieval Jewish Traders". Ghosh read this letter in the Bodleian Library at Oxford in 1978. The slave of MS H.6 stepped upon the modern history in 1942 and Ghosh makes him his point of convergence. The keen researcher begins his journey to confirm the Indians love of antiquity and their interest in an antique land. It is believed that Jews are a neglected community also regarded as unrecognized on the pages of history. It is Geniza which is the storehouse of documents give recognition to unrecognized and in turn Ghosh's contribution and efforts to acknowledge them is I think a quantum jump.

Ghosh, an anthropologist and keen observer examines two historical ages and their people; one belongs to twelfth century and the other belongs to present century. While writing this fiction he mainly focuses on two countries Egypt and India; both the countries have contributed lot in history of the world. Ghosh also takes other countries of the world in to account in its journey to dig out the buried facts of the past. Ben Yiju and his slave are introduced to show the history of medieval age. They lived in era which knew no words like race and cultural difference. They lived with harmony.

The third section "Manglore" focuses the history of Ben Yiju's stay in India for seventeen years. Ghosh visits Manglore and gives the description of the city reflects him as a keen observant. He unveils the history of Jewish merchant and Bomma. Ben Yiju is involved in trade getting married to Indian Nair girl Ashu who gives

birth to his two children a boy and a daughter; the death of his son, his daughter's marriage with his cousin and his return to Egypt with his slave Bomma are the focal point of the section. The marriage of Yiju with Indian girl highlights the history that even in twelfth century people involved in marital relationship without considering the so called modern day discrimination of caste, race, creed and nationality. They might be more tolerant in such matters.

Ghosh came across the name Bomma "a greeting" (6) mentioned in the letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaah to Ben Yiju a Jewish merchant from Tunisia. Ghosh was in search of textual proof took him to England North Africa and United States and Egypt in 1980 to 1981, 1988 to 1989 and again 1990 just before the outbreak of Gulf War. Introducing the textual evidence of Bomma's life, Ghosh comments that: "But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existence are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers, and the priest-the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time." (6) Ghosh writes that it is just an accident that such ordinary people leave traces upon world. Tabish Khair writes "*In an Antique Land* is archaeology of a great mercantile civilisation that from about the tenth century to the sixteenth century, extended from Fez and Seville in the West through Cairo and Aden around the Red Sea across the Indian ocean to Calicut and the Malabar coast." (qtd. in Khair 27)

To contrive the facts, he decides to visit the villages in Egypt and Manglore in India as Ben Yiju lived in Manglore for seventeen years and doing business between Aden and Manglore. His efforts reveal certain truth which is unknown to him. Ghosh very precisely narrates the story of Yiju and Bomma and his experience as a research scholar. While staying at the villages of Egypt he befriended many people and faced many questions asked by local people about India and its custom and its religion. Mostly they are interested in asking questions about the Hindu's worship of cows and burning of dead body as the last ritual. It suggests that the people outside India know this much about Indians, its rituals and its religion. For them it is "'Hinduki' business". (32) The questions become cliché and the

irony is these are the information about India recorded as truth. Through the research work on Bomma and Yiju Ghosh attempts to answer the questions raised by many about the oriental history. Amitav uses anecdotes to justify his research. While refereeing to Ben Yiju's reasons for marrying a girl outside his faith, he says: "If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof" (189) There is complete silence about Ashu the female Indian slave that Ben Yiju is known to have married. Ghosh finds out from documents available that she belongs to matrilineal community. It is also evident in the novel "that Ashu was 'probably beautiful'" (187) with whom Yiju fell in love. It is also believed that Yiju may have converted her to Judaism before marrying and who bore his two children. Ghosh efficiently reads between the lines and contrives the traces from complete silence. Ben Yiju's friends refused to accept the existence of a wife. Ghosh understands that this absence of evidence 'may in fact be proof that Ben Yiju did indeed marry Ashu, "for only a marriage of that kind-with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith-could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends" (188).

Ghosh's fiction *In an Antique Land* is concerned with post-colonial theory as well as subaltern studies. Egypt and India are two countries share a common history of colonial violence and in need of a modernization. He very meticulously expresses the tense relationship between these two countries. He flashes out the networks of exchange viz. money, people and goods, which were transported and traded between India and Egypt in the middle ages as in the twentieth century. Another important exchanges are little bit neglected viz. cultural and religious segments which have connected India and Egypt throughout history. Ghosh reminds us that historiography is often limited to the history of the literate. The person or a group or nation who writes and preserves a history of the people or an individual for their progeny with journals, letters, ledgers etc. become known to the world but what about the nameless masses that lived and died in obscurity, as Ben Yiju's slave would have. Certainly there is much more history which need to be unraveled and many people of the past to be heard. We forget the very essence that with the history of so called known people, there is also a history of so called unknown people who had contributed and sacrificed their life in making of a history of any nation.

It is truth universally acknowledged that history is written by the colonizers, concentrated mainly the main stream of the society. They hardly took notice of colonized or marginalized or subaltern people. Ghosh's efforts to dig out the roots of slave Bomma bears a fruits which give the facts of such neglected subjects which were till date buried in the earth.

Ghosh has collected the information about the life of Bomma from the letters he found in a repository of documents in a medieval Egyptian Synagogue. His description of Bomma is based on reasoning and speculation he can guess about his religion and birthplace and from the etymology of his name Bomma. The name is adapted from Judeo-Arabic script and can imagine that Bomma may have been witness to certain historical moments during his travels in the Middle East. Ghosh's research work with parallel study of history reveals that there was not any kind of clash between Jews and Muslim in Yiju's time. Even in Middle East Jews despite their distinct religious identity lives with Muslim amicably. In twelfth century in the Middle East, the saint-poet named Vachanaka taught the equality, creating a democratic ambience and trained artisans and working people. Therefore, it is possible that the meaning of slavery, in the time of Bomma and Ben Yiju, means the ties between master and slave, based on equality. So for Yiju, Bomma is not only a slave but business agent also; more than that he was respected member of the household of Ben Yiju.

In an Antique Land as its title suggest ancient Egypt and its rich culture; covers a very wide span of history, almost eight hundred years beginning from 1132 A.D. to 1990. Ghosh also focuses how trade and commerce flourished between different countries through Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. It also reminds how in middles ages also traders and merchants travel from sea far countries and exchange their goods. One take a note with pride that in those days Manglore used to be a very busy port hustling and bustling with traders and merchants glorifies the history of India. Manglore, Aden and Middle East were the centers from where goods particularly spices like pepper cardamom and areca nuts transported. With the trading culture Ghosh also focuses the daily life of the people. In those days Ocean trade was controlled between Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Tradesman transported pepper,

cardamom even frying pan also. The letters written by Ben Yiju to Khalaf about the lost consignment of pepper has been lost; is evident that such things were transported and suggest the human culture.

The fiction signifies and answers the question how business might have been flourished between the countries far away from each other when means of transportations were very limited and most prominently how India had attracted traders from all the way from Cairo, Aden, Middle East etc. In spite of all the hardship and seemingly impossible cosmopolitan culture flourished. India attracted people like Ben Yiju, for whatever reasons, but he became prosperous here.

In An Antique Land Ghosh gives detail about Ben Yiju who stayed in India for more than seventeen years in Mangalore. We only know that he married a Nair girl about whom there is not much information available. Ben Yiju was having a multifaceted personality, a poet, calligrapher, businessman, all rolled into one. Ghosh draws a vivid picture of Ben Yiju's closest business connections, which: "...lay with a group of merchants whom he and his friends in Aden referred to as the 'Baniyan of Mangalore-Hindu Gujarati of the 'Vania' or trading caste. Long active in the Indian ocean trade...they exerted a powerful influence on the flow of certain goods and commodities.'" (228)

So Gujarati merchants were adventurous plays a very significant role in trade and in turn economy of Malabar. Ben Yiju's network of business knew no boundaries of social, religious or geographical divisions. He traded with a Muslim, Gujarati Vania and one landowning caste of Tulund. Through the historical evidence given in the fiction, these Gujarati Vanias were very wealthy community. Even they managed the international trade of Malabar. Madmun who was adviser of Ben Yiju used to have connections with these Vanias and he kept them inform about the business trend of Middle East. It is said that Madman helped Yiju to set up his business with help of these Vanias.

There is a reference of Duarte Barbosa a Portuguese sailor visited the city in 16th century: "noted that the city's merchants included 'Arabs, Persians, Guzarates, Khorasanys, and Decanys', who were known collectively as pardesis, or foreigners."(198) The most

modern and sophisticated travellers were taken aback by the way these traders were leading their luxurious life in Calicut. In 1442 A.D. the Persian ambassador passing through the Malabar and he wrote: "They dress themselves in magnificent apparel."(199) As far as Yiju's dress is concerned, he used to wear his traditional dress of the Middle East, robes and turbans. Bomma brought two gowns for Yiju when he went to Aden for business tour. Even Yiju enjoyed the delicacies such as raisins, nougat, dates and Middle Eastern cane-sugar. Barbosa wrote: "They have large houses and many servants: they are very luxurious in eating, drinking and sleeping..."(199) The interesting thing is that these traders from different communities, religions and nations lived very peaceful life.

The deterioration began when "Vasco-da-Gama, landed on his first voyage to India, on 17th May 1498 some three hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju left Mangalore."(235) Pedro Alvarez Cabral arrived after Vasco-da-Gama and delivered a letter to Hindu ruler to expel all Muslim traders as according to his belief they are "enemies of 'Holy Faith'."(235) No country had tried such kind of control over Mangalore and its Ocean trade by force of arms. Ghosh reflects that the Indian Ocean trade was for years remained unarmed. It was considered "as a lack, or failure, one that invited the intervention of Europe with its increasing proficiency in war. (236) Ghosh registers that Gujaratis are peace loving people and they cannot bear violence, the ruler surrendered to demand of the Portuguese. Gujaratis were expert sailors also so they took advantage of it. Even ports of Gujarat particularly Rander and Diu brought brisk business. Unfortunately the trade and cultural exchange came to a tragic end at the hands of the Portuguese.

In an Antique Land is a blending of fiction and history by researcher and traveller who traces Ben Yiju's journey from Tunisia to Manglore and again back to Egypt. He also unveils the roots of Bomma and what happened to him at the end. Bomma's story ends in Philadelphia. The documents are kept in the Anneberg Research Institute, a creation of America's television magazines. *T.V. Guide* cared for "the spin-offs of Dallas and Dynasty and protected by the awful might of the American police."(292) It provides proof that Bomma was with Ben Yiju, when he went back to settle in Egypt

in the last years of his life. Ghosh has documented everything through the fiction and ultimately reaches to its zenith. Ghosh has turned the incomplete account available to him into coherent whole. Instead of ignoring the document that is so badly damaged as to be almost illegible, his creative master mind unearths the crust and with the meager historical evidence gives a history of Yiju and his slave.

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